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First glimpse of Fillmore draws mixed reviews

Residents worry about parking and access to surrounding business

by Jason Tomassini | Staff Writer

It's taken seven years of long, controversial and unprecedented negotiations to bring a music venue to Silver Spring. But after presenting initial plans for the Fillmore on Colesville Road to the community for the first time last week, it is clear planners have plenty of work ahead of them.

For starters, the operator of the Fillmore, Los Angeles-based music promoting giant Live Nation, wants to hold the first concert in September 2011, an "expedited, aggressive timeline" for an approval process that usually takes years, said Bruce Lee, president of the venue's developer, Silver Spring-based Lee Development Group.

Plus, to build an office building and hotel planned for the property adjacent to the Fillmore, the commercial development market needs to improve quickly, Lee says.

On Feb. 23, at Lee Plaza in downtown Silver Spring, residents got their first chance to grill developers on topics ranging from the hordes of rock fans who will likely pour out of the venue after shows to excessive parking at the planned adjacent office building to the safety for businesses sharing the busy service alley behind their properties.

"I can't have everyone driving behind those properties," said Joel Danches, who owns about 10,000 square feet of property between Lee Plaza and the proposed Fillmore site. "... Our needs are important, because we are taxpayers."

Last month's community meeting served to not only present plans for the Fillmore but also celebrate how far it has come. The process began seven years ago, when Montgomery County asked LDG to donate the vacant site of a former J.C. Penney department store for a music venue. After negotiations with the Alexandria-based Birchmere music venue fell through, the county signed a 20-year, \$3.26 million lease with Live Nation in January 2008.

Next were the unprecedented land-use rules passed by the Montgomery County Council in summer 2008. In an agreement not finalized until November 2009, LDG agreed to donate the land to the county and build the Fillmore as a public amenity. In exchange, LDG is allowed 15 years to build the office and hotel under current land-use rules.

Now, plans for the project have been submitted to the county Planning Board, which will review them in the coming months, with groundbreaking ambitiously scheduled for October of this year.

"It's been amazing to watch the transition of the building over the last five years," Lee said.

"I can't tell you how many talent agents per day are calling me and asking, 'Is the Fillmore really happening?'" Ted Mankin, a vice president of booking with Live Nation, said in an interview after the Feb. 23 meeting.

The 28,000-square-foot, three-story Fillmore will include a general admission area, stage, walk-up box office and two bars on the first floor, a second-floor balcony with two bars and audience seating, bathrooms a level above the balcony and a basement with offices, a lounge area, dressing rooms and performers' space. The venue has a standing-room capacity of 2,000, but 700 to 750 seats can be installed.

A curfew will exist for events held at the Fillmore, and alcohol will not be served during the last hour of each concert, planners said. These factors, however, did not assuage the concerns of all residents.

"You're going to bring very large numbers of people to the club and serving alcohol and then dumping 1,500 to 2,000 people on the streets," Silver Spring resident Mark Gabriele said.

Fine-tuning the Fillmore will be the Planning Board's primary concern when it reviews it this spring, but the board will also review the hotel and office project, which will not be built until market conditions improve, Lee said.

Both the office and hotel will be 143 feet tall, the maximum height allowable and the same height as Lee Plaza and a future office building planned for 8621 Georgia Ave.

The office will include seven floors of "class A" space, street-level retail fronting on Georgia Avenue and eight floors of parking with three levels underground. The renderings of the office building's modern, multiface design—loosely based on the image of sheet music—drew "oohs" and "ahhs" from many in the crowd, but groans from some residents angry about eight levels of parking being added downtown.

"If people are supposed to use the Metro," as Lee claimed so many of the Fillmore patrons would, "why are there so many darned parking spaces?" Silver Spring resident Brian Ditzler said. Lee said the parking is compatible with county requirements and is a key component to attracting top office tenants.

Lee moved a step closer to finding a hotel tenant last week, when LDG signed Indiana-based White/Peterman Properties Inc. to develop and own the hotel.

The company has a good relationship with the Marriott and Hilton hotel chains, but, according to Richard Parks, vice president of business development at White/Peterman Properties, there is no indication as to what hotel chain will operate the 190-room, nine-to 11-story hotel fronting on Fenton Street.

A public alley running behind the Fillmore and connecting Fenton Street and Georgia Avenue will serve as the loading area for all three buildings and the restaurants on Colesville Road and as the Georgia Avenue entrance to the office building's parking garage.

Danches said all of that activity behind his property is unsafe for tenants and he plans to inform the Planning Board.

But after seven years of waiting for a music venue that has provided equal consternation and excitement, even Danches seemed conflicted about the first glimpses of the Fillmore.

"The venue will open a whole new era of activity in Silver Spring," he said after the meeting. "... But until then, it's going to be a problem for me."